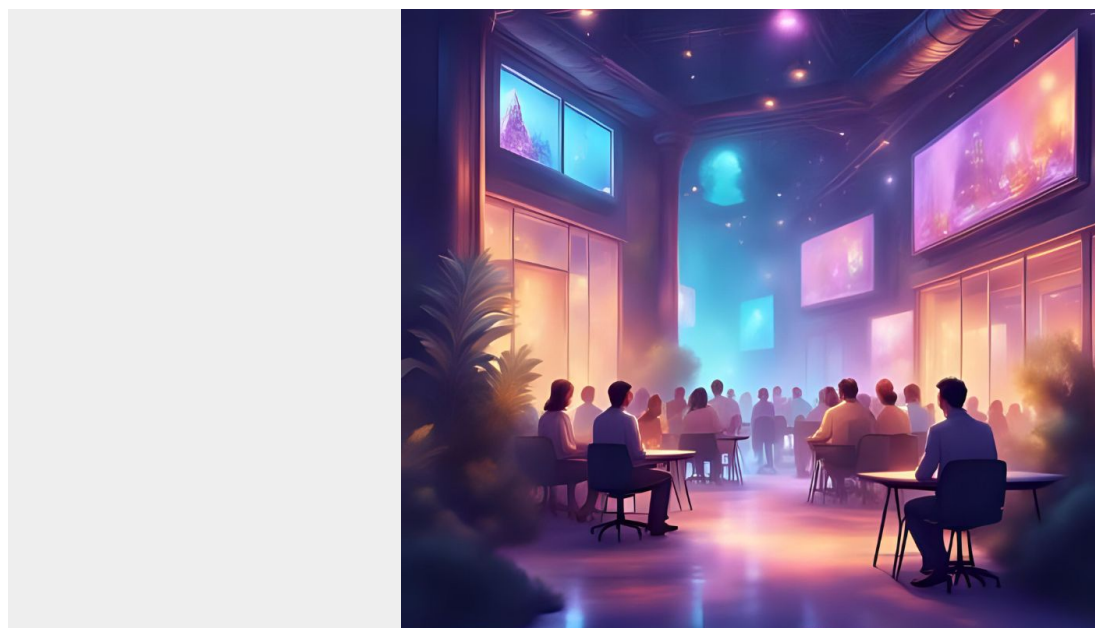




THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE SPACES IN ENABLING INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY IN ITALY

Pubblicato il 22 Maggio 2025 di Rodighiero Stefano, Busacca Maurizio e Scapolan Annachiara



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Recently, we have witnessed a proliferation of work settings reflecting a culture of openness and collaboration. This article provides evidence from Italy of how these work settings – i.e., collaborative spaces – provide support to and act as intermediaries among local actors from different fields, thus facilitating the emergence of innovation ecosystems.

Toward an ecosystemic perspective on innovation

In recent years, the locus of innovation has shifted from individual entrepreneurs and organizations to broader networks of actors. The resources and knowledge required to foster innovation are often dispersed across multiple actors (see Baldwin et al., 2024), with innovation emerging as a multi-stakeholder, multi-modal, and



multi-scalar endeavor. Within this scenario, scholars have taken an ecosystemic perspective on innovation. This perspective posits that innovation is embedded in an ecosystem of autonomous actors contributing to it in complementary ways by collaborating, co-creating value, and sharing their individual resources and knowledge endowments (Baldwin et al., 2024; Mars et al., 2012). As a result, many organizations have moved from a more traditional “silo mentality” of enclosure and protection of knowledge to increased distribution, or even democratization, of innovation processes, outputs, and impacts (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011; Chesbrough et al., 2006). This shift has resulted in many organizations relying on open models of innovation to accelerate their internal innovation processes and market the resulting outputs more successfully (see Chesbrough et al., 2006), for instance, by establishing inter-organizational partnerships or by activating (and combining) inbound and outbound knowledge flows to boost their research and development capabilities and sense, recognize, and exploit new opportunities for innovation (Cassiman & Valentini, 2016).

Inbound and outbound knowledge flows are crucial for organizations to sustain innovative endeavors in the longer term. Indeed, whereas inbound flows (flowing “from the outside-in”) contribute to increasing an organization's knowledge base through the integration of suppliers, customers, or activities from external sources, outbound flows (flowing “from the inside-out”) allow organizations to earn greater returns (e.g., profits) by favoring the circulation of internally developed ideas, intellectual property, or technology in the ecosystem. The activation and combination of these flows show how, in today's fast-changing competitive environment, it is pivotal for organizations to gather, integrate, and exploit inputs residing both inside and outside of their organizational boundaries to deliver greater value to customers, achieve greater economic viability, and increase their innovation capabilities (Cassiman & Valentini, 2016; Chesbrough et al., 2006). By mobilizing internal and external resources, organizations can also pursue a more user-centric and community-oriented approach to innovation and generate greater social impact (Baldwin & von Hippel, 2011). As a result, greater openness contributes to *“innovation that is explicitly for the social and public good [...], innovation inspired by the desire to meet [the] social needs”* (Murray et al., 2010, p. 10) of the local community whenever more traditional market provision and welfare systems fail to meet those needs. Indeed, local actors – e.g., private and public, non-profit and profit-oriented – can collaborate and co-create solutions to favor social inclusion, societal well-being, and more equitable socioeconomic development by simultaneously showing greater openness and incorporating the local community's needs.

Helix models of innovation and intermediary actors

The idea of innovation that meets social needs emerging from the interplay of multiple actors from different fields is at the forefront of the triple-, quadruple-, and quintuple-helix models of innovation (see Carayannis & Campbell, 2011). These models rest on the idea that the intertwining of multiple “spheres” of actors (or “helices”) sets the conditions for the emergence of a broader ecosystem that accelerates and sustains innovation at the local level (Carayannis & Campbell, 2011; Hasche et al., 2020). Whereas the triple-helix model was originally modeled around the contribution of university, industrial, and governmental actors, the quadruple- and quintuple-helix models consider civil society as a crucial “helix” in defining innovation processes and outputs that are more equitable and socially and economically sustainable (Carayannis & Campbell, 2011; Hasche et al.,



2020). The helix models show how, besides being increasingly open, innovation is often highly place-based and localized and thrives from the greater – social, cultural, organizational, and institutional – proximity and the co-location of actors operating in one single territory (Boschma, 2005; Von Krogh & Geilinger, 2014). Indeed, proximity and co-location facilitate communication, coordination, and the diffusion of tacit knowledge among actors from different fields while enhancing trust, mitigating tensions, and enabling cross-fertilization (see Boschma, 2005).

Through innovation ecosystems, organizations collaborate and open their boundaries to gather and integrate external resources and knowledge and increase their innovation capabilities. However, ecosystems also encompass challenges, as they often involve divergent interests that may spark tensions and require specific governing mechanisms (see Reischauer et al., 2021). These challenges can be addressed by intermediary actors that anchor and shape interactions and enable resources and knowledge to flow more smoothly across an ecosystem's multiple "helices" (Mars et al., 2012; Reischauer et al., 2021). These actors typically comprise intermediaries such as university knowledge transfer offices, professional services providers, or finance providers (e.g., venture capitalists, angel investors, public funding) – see Clayton et al., 2018. More recently, collaborative spaces have become important intermediaries in local innovation ecosystems (Aumüller-Wagner & Baka, 2023; Capdevila, 2015).

Collaborative spaces and innovation ecosystems

Collaborative space is an umbrella term that encompasses many work settings, such as coworking spaces, incubators, makerspaces, creative hubs, and science parks (see Montanari et al., 2020). These work settings can be differentiated in terms of primary target audience, size, governance, and business models. Despite these differences, they are all designed and managed based on the assumption that face-to-face interaction positively affects the likelihood of actors from different fields – e.g., from different "helices" – to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and develop a sense of community (Capdevila, 2015; Montanari et al., 2020). Coherently, Capdevila (2015) defines collaborative spaces as "microclusters" that favor innovation by concentrating and co-locating locally based entrepreneurs, start-ups, companies, and investors in the same work setting and orchestrating their interactions and innovative endeavors (Aumüller-Wagner & Baka, 2023; Cabral & van Winden, 2024). In doing so, collaborative spaces facilitate cross-fertilization through "knowledge pipelines" that involve formal and informal, more and less established local actors in value co-creation (see Capdevila, 2015). By involving less established actors (e.g., newly founded start-ups or younger entrepreneurs), collaborative spaces also endow them with social capital that they would otherwise find difficult to develop autonomously (Cabral & van Winden, 2024). Moreover, the community-infused ethos of collaborative spaces contributes to a "buzz" where local actors feel free to venture out of their boundaries, are more entrepreneurially alert, and are keener to experiment and test new ideas (Aumüller-Wagner & Baka, 2023; Montanari et al., 2020).

However, Parrino (2015) notes that proximity and co-location alone are not sufficient for knowledge sharing, mutual learning, cross-fertilization, and, ultimately, innovation to occur. Innovation often requires an active role



of collaborative spaces' founders, community hosts, and staff members, for instance, through the design of training activities, events, and networking tools and opportunities for local actors to improve their capabilities and embed themselves in their ecosystems (Cabral & van Winden, 2024; Parrino, 2015).

As these recent accounts suggest, collaborative spaces favor knowledge flows, interactions, and collaboration and contribute to innovation locally in various ways. We take stock of these accounts to investigate how collaborative spaces provide support to and act as intermediaries among local actors while facilitating the emergence of innovation ecosystems. To address this issue, we conducted a qualitative study on eight Italian collaborative spaces from March to June 2023. Some preliminary findings are illustrated in the next section.

Our qualitative study

We interviewed the founders and community hosts of eight collaborative spaces located all across Italy: three spaces were located in northern Italy (i.e., in the Emilia-Romagna, Lombardy, and Veneto regions), two in central Italy (i.e., in the Lazio and Tuscany regions), and three in southern Italy (i.e., in the Apulia and Calabria regions). The selected spaces differed in terms of the size of their urban areas: four spaces were located in larger cities (i.e., Milan, Rome, Bologna, and Florence), whereas three were located in mid-sized cities (i.e., Venice, Brindisi, and Lecce) and one in a smaller town in the Calabria region. Our qualitative study included four incubators, three coworking spaces, and one creative hub. Despite representing different types of work settings, all selected spaces focused on entrepreneurship and individual- and business-level innovation by offering acceleration, incubation, and mentorship programs alongside other forms of support for local entrepreneurs, start-ups, and companies. Most spaces combined this entrepreneurial orientation with a focus on solving unmet social needs of the local community by partnering with local authorities and third-sector organizations. They were all privately owned; however, most relied on public tenders to partly support their activities. The selected spaces were at different development stages, ranging from well-established spaces to spaces at an early development and growth stage that were still consolidating their role within their respective ecosystems.

Collaborative spaces as hosts in the ecosystem

Our study shows how collaborative spaces host local actors by providing access to shared resources such as coworking areas, digital fabrication tools, or meeting rooms and areas to otherwise locally dispersed entrepreneurs, start-ups, or companies. By sharing resources, local actors – primarily less established ones – can observe what others do, build social capital, and participate in collective practices that foster cohesion, trust, and an overall sense of community through formal meetings and informal mingling. The provision of coworking areas, tools, and other physical resources is seen as crucial by collaborative spaces' founders, as it enables their members to feel anchored to a localized community of practice. In turn, such anchoring makes members feel more capable of collaborating in value co-creation and innovation, as they perceive themselves



as truly being “in the loop” of where ideas and knowledge flow in the ecosystem.

Most of the spaces in our study also act as a “showcase” for activities (e.g., neighborhood events, arts festivals, public talks, seminars, workshops, courses) offered by locally based creative professionals, artists, or organizations who do not own facilities where they can perform such activities and need to rent them more or less temporarily. By acting as a “showcase” for local actors, collaborative spaces can increase their visibility while enabling actors who have yet to establish themselves to access and intercept a broader audience. In doing so, collaborative spaces can also strive to generate greater social impact and become a focal “third place” (see Montanari et al., 2020) for the local community to come together and jointly address specific challenges. As our study suggests, this is especially true for those coworking spaces and creative hubs combining entrepreneurial and financial support for creative professionals and artists with activities and services targeting the cultural awareness and well-being of neighborhood residents (including more vulnerable ones), thus potentially facilitating innovation that is at the same time collaborative and community-oriented and meets social needs.

Collaborative spaces as producers in the ecosystem

Our study shows how, by renting facilities and providing a “showcase” for local actors (and their activities), collaborative spaces can also design vital – and, most often, more reliable – revenue streams that help them balance their attempts to yield greater social impact with issues of economic viability. For instance, collaborative spaces usually use these streams to feed the in-house production of new activities and services that are then circulated locally and cover their costs over time. Thus, besides hosting externally produced activities and services, collaborative spaces complement and expand the existing local pool of activities and services by engaging in in-house production that directly boosts innovation.

The activities and services that collaborative spaces produce vary a lot depending on each space's size, governance, and mission. Most of the spaces in our study do not only engage in more traditional acceleration and incubation but also specialize in delivering education and training for entrepreneurs and start-ups (e.g., through seminars, workshops, or courses focusing on managerial, communication, team-building, and digital skills). Some spaces, mostly incubators and coworking spaces, have also recently started consulting and working alongside larger companies that are willing to engage in co-creation and open innovation. In doing so, collaborative spaces contribute to local talent, scout and nurture entrepreneurial ideas, and connect less and more established local actors.

Most collaborative spaces produce activities and services in collaboration with local municipalities, regional authorities, schools, and universities. In doing so, they emerge as important tools for designing and implementing smart specialization strategies and place-based policies that successfully involve local actors and cater to their needs. For instance, an Apulia-based space included in our study effectively acts as an intermediary in its ecosystem by helping municipal and regional authorities organize focus groups and



hackathons aiming to involve residents and grassroots organizations in social innovation projects and harmonize the different voices of actors belonging to all five of Apulia's "helices" (i.e., university, industrial, governmental, civil society, and environmental actors).

Collaborative spaces can also facilitate the emergence of innovation ecosystems in rural and peripheral areas and economically deprived regions, where resources for entrepreneurs and start-ups – such as venture capital, public funding, tailored policies, shared workspaces, or training and education – are inherently scarce. In these areas, collaborative spaces incorporate activities and functions similar to those of other intermediary actors whose support typically lags or is non-existent. In doing so, they act as “leaders” – or even “firstcomers” – in supporting entrepreneurship and innovation and facilitating the emergence of innovation ecosystems. As one space operating in a peripheral area in the Calabria region shows, it is possible for collaborative spaces to address the lack of locally based private and public funding by devising fundraising initiatives for entrepreneurs and start-ups or directly investing in new entrepreneurial ideas and ventures. In doing so, they can activate (and liberate) local resources and innovation capabilities and help higher-scale innovation policies (e.g., EU- or national-level policies) match the actual needs of actors who pertain to left-behind territories of different scales and sorts. Conversely, instead of acting as “leaders” in providing support, collaborative spaces located in larger, wealthier, and more entrepreneurially vibrant cities such as Milan, Bologna, or Florence often act as “complementors” that work alongside and coordinate with other intermediary actors in providing support to and enabling collaboration among local actors.

Collaborative spaces as brokers in the ecosystem

Our study shows how collaborative spaces broker interactions among local actors and embed themselves locally by combining the hosting of local actors and the production and circulation of activities and services. To successfully broker interactions, collaborative spaces must reach some critical mass and become more easily identifiable by other actors in the ecosystem. For instance, the spaces in our study that are seemingly more established locally have achieved this by diversifying their target audience and overall offering. In doing so, they have combined profit-oriented activities (e.g., consulting or training for larger companies' employees) with activities delivered not for profit (e.g., public talks, cultural events) but to increase local awareness and participation in their overall offering and appeal to a broader audience.

Providing socially and culturally oriented activities allows collaborative spaces to take a “semi-public” role in brokering interactions between public actors (e.g., local authorities, schools, universities, cultural institutions) and the local community. For instance, a coworking space in our study has managed to connect and integrate the activities of youth associations, social cooperatives, and other third-sector organizations with public providers of services relating to education and welfare, in turn helping co-create solutions to local needs, yielding greater social impact, and fostering social innovation. Moreover, by hosting in-person events, most collaborative spaces offer their members an informal setting for interaction, helping them exit formalized social norms and perceived communication barriers that would otherwise prevent them from interacting and



sharing ideas with people from other organizations, fields, or career paths.

Although collaborative spaces' spatial features and physical resources play a vital role in fostering innovation through proximity, co-location, and a sense of community, most of the spaces in our study seek to blend on-site and online forms of brokering. Indeed, most spaces offer networking tools and apps or other online platforms for entrepreneurs, start-ups, and mentors to coordinate with each other and keep interacting after in-person events, workshops, and courses. These online platforms also allow collaborative spaces to expand their outreach beyond their local ecosystems – e.g., by engaging start-ups, investors, or mentors from different Italian cities and regions or outside Italy. Moreover, a coworking space in our study has designed and curated a dedicated website to map all local innovation actors (e.g., coworking spaces, incubators, creative hubs, mentors, investors, public funding providers, and university spin-offs), gather potential best practices (e.g., in terms of innovation-related public-private partnerships, funding, or training), increase the local visibility of specific projects or funding opportunities, and match the needs and resources of each actor in the ecosystem.

Discussion and practical implications

Our qualitative study shows how collaborative spaces deliver support to and act as crucial intermediaries among local actors in three different ways: i) by hosting local actors within their premises and showcasing their activities and services; ii) by producing activities and services in-house and circulating them locally; iii) by brokering interactions among private and public, formal and informal actors belonging to multiple local “helices”. In doing so, collaborative spaces favor proximity and co-location and enable open and collaborative forms of innovation in a specific territory.

Our findings hold relevant implications for founders, community hosts, and local proponents of collaborative spaces by suggesting the different roles these spaces can play and leverage to contribute to knowledge exchange and innovation in local ecosystems. First, our findings show how collaborative spaces play a “transformative” role for local actors by hosting and showcasing their activities. In doing so, collaborative spaces attract, incorporate, and expand knowledge and resources that, for the most part, already exist in the ecosystem. As a result, they activate inbound knowledge flows that go from the “outside-in” by flowing from the ecosystem to the collaborative spaces' premises. Second, by producing activities in-house, collaborative spaces play a “generative” role at the local level, as they create (or co-create, whenever they partner with other private or public actors) new knowledge and resources that are then circulated within the ecosystem. As a result, they activate outbound knowledge flows that go from the “inside-out” by flowing from collaborative spaces' premises to the ecosystem. Finally, by brokering interactions, collaborative spaces combine inbound and outbound knowledge flows, thus facilitating the emergence and consolidation of ecosystemic relationships and arrangements locally.

Our findings hold relevant implications for companies, too. They underline how companies can engage with local intermediaries, such as collaborative spaces, to improve their knowledge base and innovation capabilities.



In doing so, companies can also increase the visibility and economic viability of their innovation outputs while striving to generate a positive impact locally by better matching their needs with those of the local community. One way for companies to achieve this goal is to allow remote workers to access collaborative spaces as their primary work locations. Coherently, an interesting avenue for future research would be to explore how the current “return-to-office” trend and its effects on companies’ remote-working policies shape the enabling role of collaborative spaces within their ecosystems.

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